

Non-existentialism: anti-natalism, ethics, and David Benatar

*“Accuracy, truth, reality, objectivity—
all that stuff gets trampled the instant it gets in the way of species survival.” ~Luno*



Most of us think our lives have positive value. Those who think so are alive *now*. Does it make sense to think this value would be transparent to someone who *isn't* alive now? To a person not yet born?

This topic in the philosophy of procreation relates to the other side of the abortion or capital punishment debate. It also connects with our [previous topic](#) as an illustration of the hyperbolic demands of ethical theory.¹ The question here is not whether there is something wrong with curtailing or aborting a life, but *whether to bring one intentionally into existence in the first place is wrong*. There are biological imperatives and religious injunctions we are all familiar with—

1. If God exists and has a rational penchant for beauty, I venture to suggest, he would want us to “be fruitful and multiply” but *only* in order thereby to persist long enough to evolve a rational appreciation of truth, goodness, and beauty (Plato’s ideals) even at the expense of our animality and its instincts. Whereupon it would feel *first evident to—then incumbent on—*us that we pass on from existence *gracefully*. What would be the point of existing forever? None that would be very pretty. We are like cut flowers in a vase. Nobody with any taste decorates their table with unnaturally durable, artificial flowers. (The “afterlife” was just a little Santa Claus story he told us when we were young. A little older, then we would tell ourselves stories about a technological fix for the malady of death. Both stories serve aesthetic purposes apart from any truth they may or may not have.)

natural and cultural forces press on the decision for many, but—for those of us who bother to *think* about it—are those adequate reasons to subject someone to a life?

...people are still expected to provide reasons not to have children, but no reasons are required to have them. It's assumed that if individuals do not have children it is because they are infertile, too selfish or have just not yet gotten around to it. In any case, they owe their interlocutor an explanation. On the other hand, no one says to the proud parents of a newborn, Why did you choose to have that child? What are your reasons? The choice to procreate is not regarded as needing any thought or justification.

Nonetheless, I think [this] attitude is mistaken.
—Christine Overall, [“Think Before You Breed.”](#)

Overall merely suggests we should ask questions first then (maybe) make babies.

Your decision about whether to procreate is serious. That makes it philosophy's business, alarming as that might sound...
—Richard Chappell, [“Is it OK to have kids?”](#)

But Chappell is not down on having kids. He actually thinks we can have them responsibly, unlike [David Benatar](#), who has recently kicked up dust on the question with this conclusion:

...in all actual cases of procreation or failure to procreate when one could, procreation is or would be wrong.
—David Benatar, [Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming into Existence](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006)

Benatar goes on to suggest that we are systematically predisposed to *overestimate* the quality of our lives. More from him in [this interview](#) and [this interview](#). Evolutionary biologist Tom Moore offers his [take on Benatar's case](#), and Elizabeth Harman a [critical review](#) of Benatar's book.

Overall, in her article above, quotes novelist Margaret Lawrence:

“I don't really feel I have to analyze my own motives in wanting children. For my own reassurance? For fun? For ego-satisfaction? No matter. It's like (to me) asking why you want to write. Who cares? You have to, and that's that.”

Is that a *rational*ly permissible position to take?

...

Ethical anti-natalism can be a logical outcome of one of the two hyperbolic moral theories we considered in the last topic concerning the supernatural² extremes one may be driven to by ethical demands.³ Benatar's basic assumptions are utilitarian. One *could* see his conclusion as a *reductio ad absurdum* of that view. Or, we might concede he is right. In which case, if we can't help but see absurdity in the thought that the universe would be a better place without us in it, the tendency to see it otherwise (to see our existence as a favor bestowed on creation) is, too, an evolutionary anodyne, a bone we are thrown having been so unlucky as to need it.

When we considered, a few meetups ago, whether it is permissible for deaf parents to genetically select for deafness in their children, if you felt an intolerance for this, you were probably thinking that a chance to live with hearing was above reproach in comparison with one without it. For Benatar, however, the hearing are only insignificantly less harmed being hearing than the deaf are by being deaf. *Both would have been better off never to have existed.*

The mistake being made in thinking otherwise is that because we can compare one experience with another experience, we somehow think we are equipped to compare an experience with a *non-experience*—an experience neither had by anyone nor haveable except on condition of the possibility of its experience being created *and* this possibility mattering to us. Benatar explains how the comparison fails. The logic of comparison or judgment between two experiences is coherent, but not that between an experience and something—we *neither know nor can care about*.⁴ Prenatal or postmortem states are not ones we “experience.”⁵ Nothing we ever experience prepares us for what it is like not to experience anything. Nor can we have any memory or premonition of not-existing to aid us in weighing the pros and cons of being alive versus being dead or non-born.

So... if you experience *any* harm at all, it is harm that *need never have happened*. And if it does happen, the one that exposed you to that harm is culpable.

The wrong done is not mitigated by the fact you also have benefitted by having been brought into existence. When you go to Las Vegas, you are harmed by gambling because the gambling venues are rigged against you from the start. It is not in your power, having gone, to avoid being harmed by the experience. That you also thoroughly enjoy becoming a little poorer in the process

2. Or *exo-natural*, since the excursion beyond the natural and everyday rational needn't tend toward anything “super” and its attendant religious connotations.

3. While Benatar's anti-natalism is largely motivated by utilitarian considerations (of a sort), there are deontological arguments to the same end as well. Otto Weininger, a “Kant gone mad,” caused an intellectual stir by coming to a similar conclusion more than a century ago.

4. Benatar assumes our intuition that the happiness of non-existents is not a *normal* concern we have, whereas their, as yet unrealized, suffering *is* something we may imagine and which may and does concern us. More on this point later.

5. Leaving aside, of course, reincarnation, channeling, a literal afterlife, and the like... for the sake of this discussion we have nothing against the *exo-natural* except the fact of its blurriness and that we prefer as much communicable clarity as we can muster.

of dreaming of fabulous wealth⁶ doesn't not *rationaly* make you whole and make the trip to Vegas worth your while. As a non-existent, nothing about Vegas can possibly be attractive to you... *No, that's not quite correct: there is no "you" even to be the object of the preposition!*

You might thoroughly enjoy *something* in Vegas, that, while leaving you poorer, also makes for a more lasting enhancement of your life. What can that thing be?... Why just the enjoyment itself! It is its own value, we might say. But where does that sort of thinking lead us? *Whatever* you experience can be the object of enjoyment with the right attitude, and that may be enough for you... But at what cost? The cost may well be justified for you, as one who *already* exists. *But it is one thing to make the best of a bad situation and another to bring about the bad situation.*

Our prospective offspring are invited to a crapshoot. Life is fun. They might win. Like we did.... *Did we win?* Some of us, maybe most, *think* so, sometimes. But Benatar points to evidence that we are fooling ourselves to think that. We are *already* here. We do what we have to do to make the best of the hand we were dealt. We are compromised. To subject another not already committed to a plight like ours, at the very least, is morally suspect.

We sit through the bad movie, but knowing that it would be this bad before buying our ticket would we have made the decision to buy it? Even if the movie was just so-so? Most of us, having already bought the ticket, would say that. But of those to whom the thought of buying the ticket would never have occurred had we not bought the ticket for them—did we do them a favor?

If we had to suffer through it, why shouldn't they? Really? Benatar sees nothing moral in such an attitude. Before we offer a more precise characterization of his argument, here are some notes on the assumptions made.

Background of the anti-natalist argument

Leaving aside for present purposes divine mandates that foreclose asking further questions, people are caused to come into existence...

1. *Naturally*, that is, without much thinking involved. The way we breathe. Something that people, like animals, just do. A veritable bodily function. We even have specialized organs for the job (the brain isn't one of them) like we do for pumping blood or extracting nutrition from foodstuffs or extracting oxygen from the air or eliminating bodily wastes. Pleasure (or non-pain) attends their use. A complex "chemistry" may be involved in choosing mates (whether by individuals or their communities) but the complexity is negotiated mostly at a subconscious level by all parties concerned... Not being able to reproduce this way can be seen as a tragedy, a disability, even a condition

6. Compare the stock market... The fun factor cannot be denied. Rigged games that pay off in fun have their consolation.

calling for a fix (hence, some people put themselves through great pain to have children some other way).

2. For *non-child-centered reasons*. The reasons deployed here involve the *express* interest of the parents, family, community, state, or species. Mom wants grandchildren. The state wants citizens. The species wants to conquer the universe.
3. For *child-centered reasons*. This is the core of the ethical concern.⁷ What does it do *for* the child to bring *it* into existence? Typical replies go like this: It is a wonderful thing to be alive. It is the greatest of all gifts. Nothing keeps on giving like life does. Why not invite new potential enjoyers of this gift?

Before we give birth and then quickly say—as your server at a restaurant is trained to say: “Enjoy!”—there are a few things we are obliged to consider:

Assuming you think ethical considerations trump all others, as most philosophers do, only the last explanation, concerning the well-being of the child, attempts to make *rational* sense. This is because:

The first cause on the list of our existence, *mindless procreation*, while understandable, is expressive of our animality. Procreation is excusable in creatures *without* mental abilities. Nature rules them. And nature does not recognize ethics in the way human reasoners have traditionally: as presupposing the freedom (at least) to take an attitude to what happens—if not, also, to shape it. Adiaphorous (amoral) nature does what it does and then does something else according to “natural law” or no law at all. Its stories have no closure, no end, no purpose, *or even the resources to notice the lack*.⁸

We notice and are compelled to supply reasons for what happens, especially when we see ourselves the cause of things. Philosophical ethics is about the foundations of those reasons. And although some theories of ethics have tried to take hints from nature in deciding what is right or wrong (Aristotle’s is the classic example), it is not the majority view among moral theorists that nature is of much help here.

The second cause of human existence, *non-child centered reasons*, quickly runs afoul of some very widely held intuitions about the proper use and deployment of human resources. The idea that you are important only, or even mostly, because of your usefulness to some project much bigger than you opens the door to something akin to the instrumental use of a human being. You

7. What nature may or may not set us up for is *amoral* from the perspective of the major moral theories. And social or political pressures to contribute elements to our collective might as a group or species verge on the *immoral*—from the perspective of those same theories, centered, as they are, on individual morality... (“Verge” because ethical thought *can* be premised on the primacy of a community after Aristotle. That path, however, leads to problematic forms of relativism.)

8. The ability to notice, to be consciousness of, on the part of an object is what converts the object into a moral agent—eligible to be a player in moral games.

might be enslaved, worse: you might serve this greater project as cannon fodder. If lucky, you might just be someone's human pet, a material or psychological dependent of family, community, state, or species. There is such a thing as enlightened slavery. Even gentle slavery. It has its charms, its consolations. It is slavery, nevertheless, to the extent your putative "individual dignity" cannot overrule the conditions of your servitude.

Since the not-yet-born are not in a position to have interests, the door to their instrumental use is open very wide,⁹ and it may not even seem to their users that they are using. It is easy to see new recruits to life as a resource¹⁰ and not as subjects of moral consideration.

So, if it is from an abundance of generosity that we give birth, we make serious assumptions about the receiver of the gift of life: That the recipient would share our perspective on the value of the gift.¹¹ Or that our perspective is an objective one, appreciable by anyone capable of judgement. We think the experience of being alive would enhance the existence of any entity. If a rock could be conferred an experiential existence by us, it seems we would expect the rock to be grateful.

Your mom

Suppose your mom gives you a nice set of bath towels for Christmas. Your bath towel cabinet won't close properly from such gifts on past Christmases. You groan privately but make a show of your appreciation. Why? Because you are now obligated to play the gratitude game. Your mom is partly responsible for having recruited you to this game. Prior to and at the moment of recruitment you were not in a position to refuse participation in the game. But now you can either play the game or not play the game. You can either not break the momentum of the game and say how nice the towels are, etc... Or you can shake things up a little and tell her what a waste these towels are and deal with the uncomfortable consequences.

It is certainly true that in the heat of a project you are constrained by expectations others have of you. One move will be rewarded. Another will be penalized. The project, like a game or a play, has momentum. You cannot *just* say "cut" and abandon the scene or walk off the set. Even if no part in the play had prior appeal for you, if the play as a whole did nothing for you, if *then* its high and low points left you cold... It is no longer a justifiable option for you to just quit because there are *consequences*, now that you've been casted, and these, too, are scripted. You've read the play. You are, after all, *in a position to*. Now. Postpartum.

Is it obvious that you were benefitted by the recruitment or the casting? You might say, well,

9. Instrumental use of human beings is expressly forbidden on deontological grounds and, at least, arguably so on utilitarian ones.

10. As they commonly are in business by "human resources" (HR) departments.

11. Gifting can, of course, be entirely for the benefit of the giver who derives pleasure from the act of giving. Whatever else this might be, it is not a moral motivation.

there was no “I” to begin with to be honored with the privilege, not until after the initiation. If so, then it is incoherent to speak of a benefit having been conferred. A gift without a recipient is not a gift. And if, in some sense, there *was* an “I” there from the start, then I was drafted into owning—not seduced by the greatness of—the gift.

Either I was done no favors by the invitation to exist because of the lack of consultation, or being added to the list of lucky existers was impossible because “I” was not a possible recipient of *any* amount of luck. If luck was a liquid, “I” would be a bottomless receptacle.

Apple pie

True, we have no idea how big my slice of the happiness pie would be prior to the chance to have some. Wasn’t it worth at least the chance? I might have been the first born of Bill and Melinda Gates...

Let’s stack the deck in favor of life and see if that alters the picture...

Further assume that my own life is not only free of material worry, but that I have excellent health. Still further assume that I am of a generous disposition, intelligent, reasonably gifted, creative, energetic, and an all around very likeable person. I fall in love with a childhood sweetheart and our love for each other never wavers. (What little friction there is between us is just the right amount to make us appreciate even more the joyful times.) Due to the virtuous training and example of my parents, I am not corrupted by wealth, but grow up to believe that my good fortune—and knowing full well it *was* good fortune—*must* be shared with those less blessed. Being intelligent, I don’t want to squander my great resources willy-nilly on well-intended but ill-advised adventures in philanthropy—the kind that only serve to line the pockets of middle persons, accomplish little, feed cheap cynicism, and leave the targets of do-gooding no better or even worse off. Motivated as I am, resourceful in every possible way, and keen to human limitations, I embark on a kind of eleemosynary project of historic proportions. Why? Because I can and want to. I am good, capable, and *happy* to help.

That last ingredient is an important topping on my prodigiously proportioned slice of pie: I positively enjoy my chosen mission in life. It is not only chosen, it *suits* me. I am genuinely happy to have been given the chance to help make this a better world. It gives me great joy.

So there... How can anyone say that my life does not have value—and I mean *to myself*? Its value to others is evident, but the question is: Isn’t *my* life wonderful and one not to be missed? And one the chance to have—like a lottery ticket in a billion dollar lottery—is something no one could possibly refuse—especially *if it was free*?¹²

12. It would not be gambling on my part as it would be if I spent a buck on a ticket that might win me such a life. The ticket was *given* to me. It cost me not even the dollar.

Perhaps we need to add a dash of realism to the pie filling here... Suppose my life *did* have some bad things in it, but just enough to make it seem ever so slightly more plausible (though not enough to taint its glory). Suppose when I was two, I swallowed one of the silver baby spoons I was born with, and surgery was subsequently required. The surgery went off like a charm and, though I cried a little (they say), I can barely remember the incident. This pinch of verisimilitude added (and we could add a little more), does it change anything? No? I thought so. Our conception of a worthwhile life is roomy enough to incorporate a modicum of tribulation. I can even say, truthfully, “I, too, know suffering.” No life would be complete without a little.

So here is the gift I was given: a life with a very high happiness quotient. How can it be said of my life that it is one that any rational being in the universe who would not die for?...

But the answer Benatar proposes is still: *all recipients, were they in a position to rationally assess their situation, would choose to decline the “gift” of life* if the alternative was never to exist at all. Thanks, but no thanks.

...

There are two parts to Benatar’s argument that bringing into existence new sentient beings is immoral. The first, the “asymmetry argument,” supports the claim that it *causes harm* to do so. The second addresses the issue of the *extent* of the harm and concludes that it is considerable.

Benatar’s asymmetry argument

The way goodness and badness attach to pain and pleasure is not symmetrical, as we might be tempted to think. The absence of pain is uncontroversially a good thing. The absence of pleasure is *not* uncontroversially a bad thing. Here’s why:

The absence of pain is a good thing *even* if there is no one in a position to experience its absence.

The absence of pleasure is *only* a bad thing if there is someone in a position to experience the deprivation.¹³

13. Benatar spells out this argument in the second chapter of his book.

These intuitions, elevated by Benatar into principles, are implicit in our understanding of pain and pleasure. The concepts as normally understood make for these assessments. Do we grieve the unborn children of billionaires their deprivations?¹⁴



[David Benatar himself [barely exists](#).]

But we do show concern for the *possibility* of painful experience even where none has occurred or is likely to occur because no one is or is likely to be around to experience it. It occurs to us there *might* be a sentient being who could. The expression “an accident waiting to happen” conveys alarm even when no accident has happened and no one is around to have it. We recognize possibilities of pain and take pains to prevent or avoid them. We treat pain almost *as though* it were a disembodied condition just waiting to befall us. Hence, we factor the possibility of pain into our assessment of possible experience as though it were significant.

To the sentient beings we know, exposure to the harsh Martian environment would be harmful to the point of [being deadly](#). But there are no sentient beings there now to experience exposure. We think: *but there might have been, might yet be*.

A toddler playing unattended in a room when next door, in a sock drawer, is a loaded pistol has been harmed by the mere exposure *even if* the child never finds the pistol or learns of its having been there.

We do not seem to think in the same way about pleasure. *Disembodied* pleasure is harder to conceive as being of much interest to anyone. It is of great concern to us, obviously, *the embodied*, to have pleasure visited upon us. The possibility that I might have a pleasurable experience is no small thing. If I don't have it, I feel deprived. *But I exist*. Were I non-existing, it's not clear what it could mean to say that I am deprived.

You cannot say: “But you *might* have existed and experienced that pleasure and thus have been deprived.” Why not? Think of all the beings who might have existed whose non-existence neither they nor we regret. *They* don't regret because they *can't*. They are not around to. *We* don't regret because we (just) don't. Perhaps the enormity of such regret would be toxic to our well-being. Think of all the ova that never got fertilized. Worse: all the sperm that never got to fertilize. Each of these zygotes *might* have occurred in a possible world. That's one hell of a lot of regret.

...

14. The question is not about whether our empathetic imaginations can stretch that far but about the coherence of the terms in the question.

Thus Benatar establishes that coming into existence is a harm over not existing at all. Even if all conditions possible for a pleasurable existence were actualized, only the *already* in existence can benefit from them. While both the existing and the non-existing can and (usually) are harmed by exposure to the possibility of pain.

Benatar's reasoning, of course, is premised on utilitarian considerations. The mix of pain and pleasure are the sole measures of a worthwhile life, and there is never a net gain in pleasure over pain, once life has started, contrary to our first (perhaps) impressions.

But, you say, this is plainly false: *most people who are alive say they are happy to be alive!*

True, and next we'll explore with Benatar why they say such things.

"The bright side of life"

*When you're chewing on life's gristle,
Don't grumble, give a whistle!
And this'll
help things turn out for the best...*

~Eric Idle, [The Life of Brian](#)



Unfortunately (or maybe fortunately, depending on how you look at it), we are not good at offering anything like objective assessments of the quality of our own lives. Benatar's next move is to show us how it is that not only do we need to exist to experience benefit (duh?) and so the non-existent cannot be benefited, and *don't* need to exist to be threatened with harm—even the supposed possible benefits of existing are very highly overrated.

Suppose we accept his view that while non-existers cannot possibly be benefited by being thrust into existence, they most certainly can be exposed to harm by the push, *isn't it still possible that the benefits of existing typically outweigh the inevitable harms?*

Benatar responds: *No, even existers, those already "enjoying" existence, are in the peculiar position of not being able to face the magnitude of the harm they experience.*

Supposing we are already here. We should make the best of it. And hardly anyone *needs* to be

told that. Even nature conspires to make sure we do.

Benatar points to three psychological penchants characteristic of existers:

1. what psychologists have dubbed “Polyannaism.”¹⁵
2. adaptation, and
3. comparison.

There is plenty of literature to suggest that these are not speculative notions or odd intuitions but well-documented features of human psychology.¹⁶ By far, the most potent of these tendencies for Benatar’s conclusion is the first.

Pollyannaism. However badly things may have gone for us (viewed from a perspective not already compromised with an agenda), we seem inclined to say we are happy with our lives, and look forward to more of the same. Not everyone all of the time feels this way. But most do most of the time. This has been confirmed again and again in the psychological literature (as well as, for what its worth, by common sense). It is also not hard to understand why. The self-assessment that, all things considered, we are happy to be alive is insured by natural selection. Chronic lookers on the dark side do not reproduce easily. That they do at all perhaps is indicative of some corrective their perspective supplies. But a little realism goes a long way. The allele for rose-colored glasses is dominant. True objectivity about our happiness has little to be said for it from an evolutionary perspective.

Adaptation. And when things do take a turn for the worst, we adapt. We get used to it. It becomes our new baseline from which we measure further developments. A lowered bar makes them easier to take. Yes, untoward events unsteady, traumatize us even, but posttraumatic adaptation is far more common than total debility. Chronic pain can be managed. Usually is. What doesn’t kill us makes us stronger, Nietzsche used to say... *until one day it does*. (But when that happens we stop making self-assessments.)

Comparison. If we fall in the dumps, we can always stroll “[the streets of London](#)” or [Los Angeles](#). There will always be those less fortunate. We’ll learn gratitude. We can count our blessings. Oh, and a little [schadenfreude](#) sometimes helps, too...

Adaptation and comparison are often parasitic on pollyannaism. But they are not picky. We adapt to wonderful developments as well as terrible ones.

And, yes, we do compare ourselves to those much *luckier* than us, too. To negative effect,

¹⁵ From 1913 novel [Pollyanna](#) by Eleanor H. Porter whose protagonist, Pollyana, finds something to be glad about in every situation. Pollyannaism is also known as the “Pollyanna principle” or “positivity bias.”

¹⁶ See chapter three of Benatar’s book for references.

usually. So this is not encouraged. If we do compare and are disturbed by it, we have it coming if we get depressed. The reverse, however—the enlistment of adaptation and comparison to serve the ends of pollyannaism—is the norm. Witness the massive encouragement industry. It exists to enforce the norm. Much “talk therapy” relies on reminding us to put and keep those rose-colored glasses on. But the insight Benatar relies on is that most of us do *not* require the reminder. It comes naturally. And, moreover, we are told, it is healthy. “Accuracy, truth, reality, objectivity—all that stuff gets trampled the instant it gets in the way of species survival.”¹⁷

One more assumption

Who listens to philosophers?...

The Romanian philosopher [E. M. Cioran](#)’s mother once said to him that if she had known he would be so unhappy, she would have aborted him. He wrote books with titles like *The Trouble with Being Born*, *Drawn and Quartered*, *On the Heights of Despair*, and *The Temptation to Exist*. The episode made an impression on him, though.¹⁸ His mother must have known something he didn’t. Perhaps she knew that life is *not* to be judged exclusively in terms of its pleasure or pains.

Nietzsche, again, always has something quotable on subject: “If we have our own *why* in life, we shall get along with almost any *how*. Man does not strive for pleasure; only the Englishman does.”¹⁹ Historically, English philosophers have had a thing about hedonism. Other philosophers have founded ethical thinking on different “whys.”

Not only may we be motivated by things other than pleasure or pain, some thinkers consider sentience per se irrelevant to our business here. Aristotle thought that what most people consider a life of happiness—one of sufficient wealth and health to be long and interesting—was a good but only if it led to a “higher” kind of happiness *not* tied to those things. Kant’s categorical imperative is utterly blind to anything like pleasure or happiness of any rough or even rarified variety. From Kant’s perspective, pain and pleasure are only on the moral map as accessories, that is, if—given our embodiment, our “animality”—we can’t neglect them on pain of death or mental collapse. It just so happens they are typically important, but they are by no means

17· Bianco Luno, *leçons en ténèbres*.

18. Having read many of Cioran’s books, I don’t think he was an anti-natalist. That would be too Anglospheric and simple. Something about misery made him ecstatic.

19 Friedrich Nietzsche, [Twilight of the Idols](#), “Maxims & Arrows,” #12 .

essential to a moral actor. Those of us blessed or cursed with the capability for rationally autonomous behavior are under a duty to strive to become such actors. The hell with a comfortable life!

Finally, there are *few* feminist thinkers who are straightforward utilitarians—as Benatar is. In general, feminist ethical theorists have shied away from principlist ethics, especially utilitarianism.²⁰ (Kant has a notable following among feminists but with some interesting qualifications.²¹) More often, feminist ethical theorists have been drawn to non-prescriptive, non-principlist, more pragmatic accounts of morality reminiscent of those of David Hume or Aristotle.²²

Half the species is female. The final steps in bringing someone into existence, like it or not, are theirs. As gatekeepers to life, you would expect they have opinions on the delicate matter of whether to be or not to be is a good thing. They do and I cannot imagine they would take any principle so seriously that it interferes with a mandate of nature.

Some lives—all things considered and encompassing much more than *merely* the well-being of the child—are worth bringing into existence. Some are not. Both for any number of reasons. For the sake of this discussion we have confined ourselves to one form of consequentialist, specifically, utilitarian,²³ argument on the matter—a very interesting one, however, because of utilitarianism’s ties to a naturalistic account of human experience and that account’s general popularity among contemporary philosophers.

But I cannot help but notice these “rejectionist”²⁴ or “life-refuting” systematic, rule-based views have nearly all been formulated *by men*. Not that there aren’t feminist antinatalists, but they generally do not proceed from principlist ethics.²⁵ I think a feminist view on the very same existential landscape that so frightens Benatar (and many others) would reveal very different sights.

...

20. It is not surprising that most women would keep as much respectable/respectful distance from Benatar’s self-professed “pro-death” view on abortion as they would from his fellow utilitarian [Don Marquis’s future-like-ours “pro-life” view](#).

21. A disproportionate share of Kant’s contemporary champions are women: Christine Korsgaard, Barbara Herman and Onora O’Neill, to name a few notables. Why that might be I speculate elsewhere.

22. Examples would be Rosalind Hursthouse, Annette Baier, and Nel Noddings.

23. There are deontological arguments (as well as non-Western ones) to the same end. See note 3.

24. A term used by Ken Coates for the ancient family of views of which Benatar’s is a contemporary instance. See his *Anti-natalism: Rejectionist Philosophy from Buddhism to Benatar*.

25. Consider [this discussion](#) where it is asked whether it is possible to be *both* pro-choice and anti-natalist? Benatar’s position, which he makes explicit in chapter 5 of his book, is a foregone conclusion—because it is rule-based: yes, they are contradictory. Morally speaking, if not quite legally (yet), abortion (up to the point that it can be said the developing fetus has clear interests, roughly at 28 weeks) is mandatory. *No means no when it comes to letting kids happen!* Once they happen, however, the game changes radically. The regrettable deed is done. The kid is stuck having to make the best of a bad situation. All we can do and should do is help.

But as long as no one listens to them, philosophers will presume a license to toy with the truth.

Appendix

1. David versus an army of Goliaths

The original David got lucky with his slingshot and just one Goliath. But Benatar's suggestion has gotten a horde of them arrayed against him. Not only are there biological imperatives and religious injunctions but, adding to those, there are no mean political and economic agendas to contend with.

How is *democracy* supposed to function without majority rule? Don't think that convincing others with reason alone will ever win your side sufficient votes. Given a choice between thinking and having sex, we know what wins hands down. Having lots of productive sex can drum up votes. Democratic politics has a vested interest in breeding new voters.

Then there is the critical underpinning of the most successful economic system to date. *Capitalism* relies upon an imbalance of power between labor and capital that favors the latter. Labor is cheap when the supply is abundant. *It must be kept abundant*. When the local supply dries up, we import it from abroad—keeping it abundant, its costs low, consumers needy and aplenty, and nets high. But what if it dries up *everywhere*? That is just not acceptable. Who will work cheap and need our widgets? Exploitation requires victims. Suckers have to be born everyday in sufficient numbers to sustain ever denser concentrations of wealth.²⁶

With biology, religion, politics, and economics all aligned against him, Benatar, I'm sure, is well aware he is spitting in the wind.

2. Scripture

A paragon of consistency, it gets quoted by Benatar at the start of chapter 5, the one on abortion:

Cursed be the day on which I was born: let not the day on which my mother bore me be blessed. Cursed be the man. . . because he slew me not from the womb; so that my mother might have been my grave and her womb always great. Why did I come out of the

26. Can capitalism survive world population stagnation, let alone, decline? See, for instance, arguments like [this](#). Consider also economist Bryan Caplan's [case for having more kids](#).

womb to see labour and sorrow?

~Jeremiah 20:14-18

And Job spoke, and said, ‘Oh that the day had perished wherein I was born, and the night which said “There is a man child conceived.” Let that day be darkness. . . As for the night, let darkness seize upon it. . .because it did not shut up the doors of my mother’s womb. . . Why did I not die from the womb? Why did I not perish when I came out of the belly?. . . For now should I have lain still and been quiet. . . or as a hidden untimely birth I had not been; as infants that never saw light.’

~Job 3:2-4, 6, 10, 11, 13, 16

See also [More notes on Benatar](#)

~Victor Muñoz

August 2016

the Philosophy club



“Objective? We wouldn’t be capable of it if our lives depended on it...
thank goodness, they don’t.”
~B. Luno

Be a fruit fly and multiply.
~Genesis 1:28